Borivali psychiatrist Bharat Vatwani, 60, has been rescuing the mentally-challenged from Mumbai’s streets for the past 30 years

Mumbai hero wins Magsaysay Award

The other winner from India this year is Ladakh-based educationist Sonam Wangchuk, the inspiration behind Aamir Khan’s character in 3 Idiots

Kolkata-born Bharat Vatwani, 60, has been recognised for his tremendous courage and healing compassion in embracing India’s mentally-affected destitute, and his steadfast and magnanimous dedication to the work of restoring and affirming the human dignity of even the most ostracised, the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation said in its citation.

Another Indian, Sonam Wangchuk, renowned Ladakhi engineer and education reformist, too, has won the award.

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He has been recognised for his contribution in harnessing nature, culture and education for community progress.

The Magsaysay Award is the highest honour in Asia and is equivalent to the Nobel Peace Prize. The winners were announced on Thursday. They will be formally conferred the award on August 31 in Philippines.

30 years of service

For Dr Vatwani, the award is the culmination of three decades of dedicated service to the cause of the “wandering mentally ill.” For the city’s destitute, covered in festering wounds and living on the streets, he is their saviour. He takes them in, cleans their wounds, gives them a bed, and treats their mental illness.

Dr Vatwani’s long journey began quite by chance at a restaurant with his wife and fellow psychiatrist, Dr Smitha Vatwani.

“We saw a man scooping out water from the gutter using a coconut shell. We spontaneously and emotionally reached out to him and treated him. He turned out to be a science graduate and his father held an administrative post in the zilla parishad in Andhra Pradesh. We wrote a letter to his father. That made us feel nobody was doing anything about the wandering mentally ill and we decided to focus on the issue,” he told Mirror at his clinic in Borivali.

He founded Shradhha Rehabilitation Foundation in 1986, which was registered with the Charity Commission in 1991.

Over the years, the foundation has treated and rehabilitated thousands of patients. After starting a new facility in Kharaj in 2006, it began to keep a count of its patients. In the last 12 years, it has rehabilitated around 5,000 patients.

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Not an easy journey

The journey was far from smooth. Dr Vatwani faced his toughest challenge in 1997, when he opened a mental hospital in Dahisar. “Locals opposed the move. They put up a huge banner as a form of resistance, they took us to court. They said mentally-ill patients should not be around among ‘normal’ society members and that children would be influenced. That was the worst time. We were on the verge of giving up our work. Then the high court ruled in our favour, saying the mentally ill deserve to be a part of society and cannot be removed,” he said.

The process of rehabilitation itself is a difficult task. “Sometimes, it takes months to locate the family of a patient. We have a girl from Tripura right now, and we have not been able to find her home,” he said.

At present, the Kharaj centre has 123 inpatients.

In a hopeful sign of changing social attitudes towards the mentally ill, Vatwani said he did not encounter any problem when he started a facility in Kharaj. As word of the Vatwani’s work spread, local authorities and the police brought destitute people to them. Dr Vatwani hoped that the Magsaysay win would “make people more compassionate towards the mentally ill.”

The other recipients are Youk Chhang of Cambodia, a Khmer Rouge genocide survivor; Vo Thi Hoang Yen of Vietnam, who fought discrimination against the disabled; Maria de Lourdes Martines Cruz of East Timor, who built care centres for the poor amid civil strife; and Howard Dee, former Filipino envoy who led peace talks with communist insurgents.

Carmencita Abella, Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation president, said the winners “are clearly Asia’s heroes of hope, moving their societies forward through their unequivocal pursuit of the larger good.”